

# BuffaloNews.com

## Day care practices prompt questions

By **Matthew Spina**

Published: February 14, 2010, 7:08 AM

[0 Comments](#)

Updated: August 21, 2010, 4:41 AM

The head of the state's Office of Children and Family Services says Erie County should have consulted with her staff before refiguring child care subsidies to throw some 1,100 children off Erie's program.

"We were not happy with the fact that they did not consult with us and seek our technical assistance and help," Commissioner Gladys Carrion said, "... or give us notice they were doing that, in terms of lowering the eligibility limits.

"We are doing a program review in Erie County," she added. "We have some real concerns about the management of the program there."

Erie County's Social Services commissioner, Carol Dankert, took exception to Carrion's remarks. Dankert said she and her staff talked with the state office throughout 2009 to address the growing cost of the program that helps the working poor with day care expenses— in and around the nation's third-poorest major city.

"If talking with them all through 2009 is not early notice, I don't know what early notice is then," Dankert said. "Our attempts to engage OCFS around this issue are well-documented."

Carrion also described as "poor public policy" Erie County's willingness to accept a potential expansion to its welfare rolls rather than appropriate an estimated \$10 million more in county tax dollars to keep the subsidies at 2009 levels.

Erie County officials calculated that they could save local taxpayer dollars by restricting child care subsidies, even if many disqualified recipients then quit their jobs and sign on to an array of welfare programs.

While county officials view a spike in the welfare rolls as unlikely, they have acknowledged that the federal and state governments, not county taxpayers, finance the overwhelming percentage of those welfare services.

"If I felt we had other options, I certainly would have taken them," Dankert

responded. "Do I support working families and the supports they need? Absolutely."

Carrion's remarks came as Assemblyman Jim Hayes, R-Amherst, questioned her during an Albany hearing this week on the state's 2010-11 budget and its effects on her office, which arranges child care block grants for New York's counties.

Hayes lamented that other counties might follow Erie's lead as a way save county tax dollars. He called it an "unintended consequence" of the financing arrangements for the child care program and many federal social programs.

"It will only be a matter of time before the word gets out and spreads to other counties that this is an opportunity for them," he said.

Meanwhile, some of Erie County's disqualified clients have filed "fair hearing requests," to challenge the county's decision to deny their benefits and to ask whether Erie gave proper notice of its new eligibility rules. Hearings are held every week.

Critics of County Executive Chris Collins' decision to cut child care subsidies say he has made it more difficult for the working poor to make ends meet as they move into better-paying jobs. The chants from some 100 protesters outside the Rath County Office Building followed that theme Tuesday.

Collins and his Social Services Department made it more difficult for working-poor families to qualify for child care subsidies by lowering the maximum allowable income from 200 percent of the poverty level to 125 percent. That change took some 1,100 children from almost 700 families off the program, county officials said.

While Carrion said she was not happy Erie County did not seek Albany's help, both county officials and aides in her office have acknowledged that they began talking early in 2009 about Erie's worsening problem. Yet the Office of Children and Family Services apparently was surprised by Erie County's decision late last year to give affected families just 10 days to make other arrangements. The alert was later extended by 30 days.

The Collins administration argues that it cannot continue to afford to pay larger percentages of the subsidies for the working poor.

Erie County in recent years has not been spending all of its available child care money. As a result, it got less money from state government. For example, Erie was rendered ineligible for an early round of federal stimulus money targeted at child care because officials saw that Erie County had been rolling over some of its unspent child care block grant from one year to the next.

The county's Social Services Department says it was being prudent. County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz, in his own review of the program, said Erie County could have received more money and softened the hit to the working poor had it been spending all of its available grant.

Still, Poloncarz, Carrion and the Collins administration say that state and federal

support has waned in recent years.

“First and foremost, we need additional dollars,” Carrion testified Tuesday. “And my response, in trying to get additional dollars from the federal government, still stands. And that’s where we need to look, quite frankly.”

---

## Comments

---

**There are no comments on this story.**

Copyright 1999 - 2010 - The Buffalo News copyright-protected material.